

Russell Thorburn

Reese at the Asylum in the West of Ireland

The interns hogtie a shrieking private
who disassembles dreams until there's a fragment
of sky in his blue left eye. "No talking today,"
he cries as they shove his head between
his legs, kick him for good measure.

His naked body is returned for delousing,
his analyst from the war board
waiting to copy notes, if he'd only
say what happened in that pillbox
where the squad located him, the grenade pin
holding back an explosion in his hand
and the lieutenant staring up at concrete;
but Reese imitates a sea gull
in flight, rolls his eyes, makes
a popping sound, and there's no way he's
going to talk about the pillbox in France,
or whisper coherently about mortar
fire that kept him from leaving that damn box,
or how the young blonde in a dirty chemise
didn't wait for the German, but slid
from the dust and chipped concrete,
holes where you could put a fist, and died
in cold fire without another breath.

There's no way he can tell what happened
next, when he unloaded his weapon
into Germans, who raised their hands.

He might have looked at blue sky,
heard a cricket sing before the smoke cleared,
read poetry in cornfields
before the tractor bumped by to pick him up,
his father leaning to the side, asking.
“What the hell is that?”
And Reese would have told him it’s a book.

The young blonde in a heap seen
outside the pillbox. The priest
who absolved him drinking wine
beside three German corpses
who would never break bread again.
And Reese measures blue sky through
the window, glancing first at the analyst,
then the dimensions of a wired cross,
as the interns curse him, point to the chair
where they want to tie him to the rungs,
so his veins will grow large and purple,
and the horn-rimmed analyst can ask, “When
did you first think you could fly like a sea gull?”

After the Second Mortar Shell Punched Its Fist through the Chapel Wall

twenty coats of gesso were licked off the icons
by fire. And two American soldiers
crouched by the altar. Heaven descended
from above in the plaster. Reese and I
coughed; we ducked our heads and saw the priest
smother the canvas of Jesus walking on the water.
His arms spread out, as if he were swimming
with the frail arithmetic of a saint’s body.
A cigarette and a look at the icons was all we had
wanted before the mortars measured us:
to study how Jesus’ hand
frozen in a gaze of rabbit-skin glue
could make a sinner search for his soul.

A blonde girl undressed to a dirty chemise
 and a smirk eating cheese while the priest's words
 floated us up a ladder, miles away
 from garroting Germans in a wheat field,
 or the talk about Jimmy Dorsey.
 Reese asked if the eyes of the priest's saints
 were daubed with coffee; he had drunk
 that sinister grace before; and that was
 when God or the Germans spoke,
 what was the difference, who could tell
 one voice from the other, while mortar shells crumbled
 in thunder and fire? Reese pulled out the blonde
 and I dragged the priest by his heels toward
 the wine cellar.

Apollinaire Explains to Mephistopheles

How he never read Aristotle
 but pretended to know the heaviness
 in each word; what life meant
 after the doctor shakes his head.

We axe a part of others' lives,
 that lie blown out like labored breath:
 the unthinkable: why we are placed on earth.
 Mephistopheles' words this wrinkle of air,

his nakedness showing from the armor
 he wears in tribute to the dead.
 And the poet on the divan, windows
 to the flutter of sound below,

feels he cannot breathe
 through another hour, and says
 we are always dying, it's strange
 to find we are living a minute more.

His forehead swept clean of moist hair,
dark as the Devil's glistening eyes
who blows out another lie: to die
is to know you are nothing.

Russell Thorburn is an NEA fellow who has published two volumes of poetry, *Exposed Splendor* and *Approximate Desire*.